

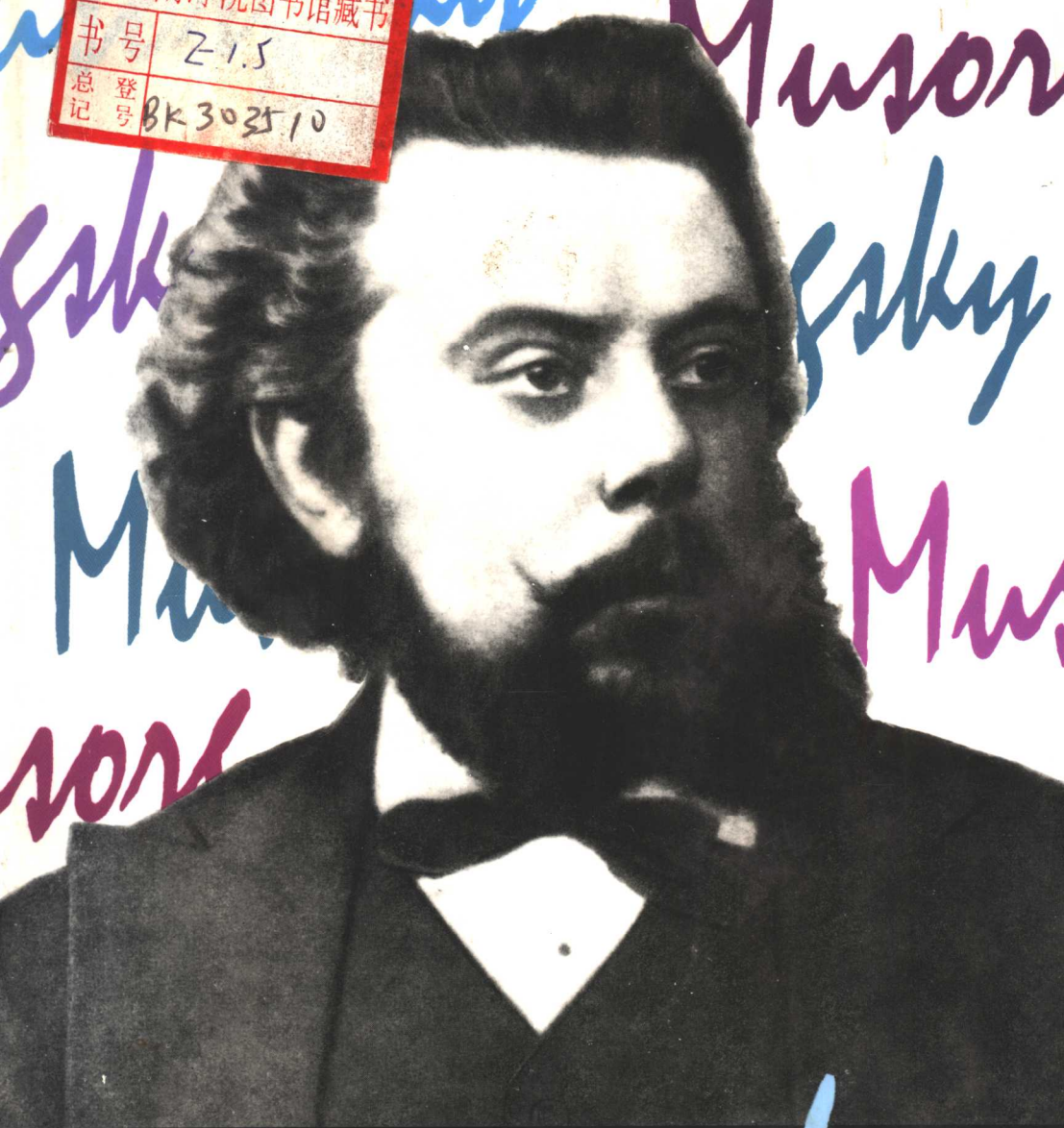
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# Mussorgsky

EIGHT ESSAYS AND AN EPILOGUE

an Epilogue  
(Mussorgsky)

RICHARD TARUSKIN

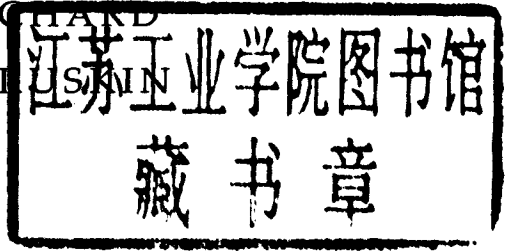
# ==== Musorgsky ====

*Eight Essays and an  
Epilogue*



*By*

RICHARD  
TALUSLIN



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GERALD ABRAHAM

*in memoriam*



Искусство есть средство для беседы с людьми,  
а не цель.

Art is a means of human exchange, not an end.

*Modest Petrovich Musorgsky, Autobiographical Note  
(June 1880)*

# FOREWORD

By

Caryl Emerson

---

IN 1839, the year of Musorgsky's birth, the Marquis de Custine made a three-month journey through the Russian Empire. The travel account he published four years later, *La Russie en 1839*, became an international bestseller; to this day, it is read as a key to that country's most grimly persistent cultural traits.<sup>1</sup> Astolphe de Custine was an aristocrat from a family ravaged by the French Revolution. Nevertheless, he came to view the Russian absolute autocracy (and the cunning, imitative, servile subjects it engendered) as far more deceitful and potentially dangerous than the more straightforward instability he had known at home. As chief historical culprit Custine named Peter the Great, who, "paying no respect to time," had thrust Western forms so precipitously onto his barbaric homeland that organic maturation had become almost impossible.

And yet the Russian sense of time fascinated him. Contemplating the austerity and earnestness of Tsar Peter, Custine wrote: "In Russia at that time, everything was sacrificed to the future; every one was employed in building the palaces of their yet unborn masters . . . There is certainly a greatness of mind evidenced in this care which a chieftain and his people take for the power, and even the vanity, of the generations that are yet to come. . . . It is a disinterested and poetical sentiment, far loftier than the respect which men and nations are accustomed to entertain for their ancestors."

The Marquis de Custine was unjust in many of his judgments, but on this point he was right. Imperial Russia—and especially its capital,

<sup>1</sup> See the recent reprint edition of the first (anonymously translated) English version of 1843, the Marquis de Custine, *Empire of the Czar: A Journey through Eternal Russia* (New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1989). Quotations in this essay occur on pp. 600, 109, and 206 respectively. George Kennan has called *La Russie en 1839* "not a very good book about Russia in 1839" but "an excellent book, probably in fact the best of books, about the Russia of Joseph Stalin" (George F. Kennan, *The Marquis de Custine and His Russia in 1839* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971], p. 124).

St. Petersburg—was heavily mortgaged to future glory. This appetite was reflected in all the arts. In the 1840s and 1850s, sentimentally optimistic historical drama was extremely popular on the Russian stage; from the 1860s on, in a flush of patriotic feeling occasioned by the Great Reforms and later fed by emergent Pan-Slavism, Rimsky-Korsakov and many lesser talents were turning these dramas into historical operas inspired by both socially progressive and statist-expansionist historiography. Even that small band of gifted, contentious amateurs who made up the "New Russian School of Music" was not immune to the call for a great and forward-looking Russia. The patriotic ideology of Serov's 1865 opera *Rogneda* had much in common with Glinka's founding text of thirty years before, *A Life for the Tsar*.

One member of the Nationalist School, however, remained consistently outside this understanding of empire and historical progress. Where other composers of his generation celebrated integration and grandeur, he was at his best breaking things down, isolating Russian leaders from the people they aspired to lead and denying historical effectiveness to both sides. He invited his audience to laugh as well as to weep at the broken parts; and his special talent, it seemed, was to juxtapose estranged social classes so that maximal confrontation produced minimal communication. Because his creative personality underwent major (but usually well-masked) shifts throughout his short life, the most painstaking scholarly energy and insider's knowledge is required to reconstruct the musical and extramusical context for his works. It is this fully illuminated story that Richard Taruskin, in the path-breaking essays collected here, unfolds around Modest Musorgsky, Russia's greatest national composer.

Musorgsky's vision was neither populist nor imperial. He granted the people no special virtues, and doubted that the passing of time could itself assure to any nation victory. In 1872, several weeks into the gala celebrations marking the bicentennial of Peter the Great's birth, he wrote to Vladimir Stasov, "The power of the black earth will make itself manifest when you plow it to the very bottom. . . . And at the end of the seventeenth century they plowed Mother Russia with just *such* [alien] tools . . . And she, our beloved, received the various state bureaucrats, who never gave her, the long-suffering one, time to collect herself and to think, 'Where are you pushing me?' . . . 'We've gone forward'—you lie. 'We haven't moved!' Paper, books have gone forward—we *haven't* moved. . . . The people groan, and so

as not to groan they drink like the devil, and groan worse than ever: *haven't moved!*"<sup>2</sup>

Anyone familiar with Musorgsky scholarship will sense how embarrassing this piece of epistolary evidence is for the received image of the composer, both in Russia and abroad. Musorgsky the *narodnik* or radical populist, Musorgsky the rebellious antiestablishment figure and singer of the Russian folk—these were obligatory epithets in the civic-minded 1860s and 1870s as well as during the Soviet era. Along with this political correctness came the image of Musorgsky as a latter-day holy fool: the tragic and seedy figure in Repin's famous portrait, an amateur of genius who was also, alas, an alcoholic, a man who in his lucid moments jotted down raw, unconsidered masterpieces—in short, a creator not in control of his own significance. At the base of both images is the same assumption: that Musorgsky remained, throughout his life, a contrary child. Thus the composer is not perceived as having developed through his own disciplined, consciously creative choice; he is explained as naively spontaneous or as politically "oppressed," and everywhere he is seen as a man in opposition to the institutions and traditions that surrounded him (rarely an integral part of them). The most enduring virtue of Taruskin's work, perhaps, is its reconquest of a wider, healthier, more complexly intelligent image of Musorgsky. As a musician Musorgsky was indeed deficient in some areas of technique, and he was clearly a man of unappealing prejudices. He was also, however, a fastidious craftsman open to multiple influences, flexible on occasion but equally distinguished by a principled stubbornness.

The chapters that follow are the product of two decades' work by an American scholar who, it is fair to say, has almost single-handedly revised and set right the nineteenth-century Russian operatic canon. For sheer density of information per page—considering also the footnotes, which often amount to miniature essays—Richard Taruskin is without peer; what is remarkable, however, is his ability to shape this vast bulk of data into sharply articulated theses. Where others might inundate, Taruskin pursues an argument. This dual accomplishment is of the utmost importance. For until quite recently in Anglophone countries, the objective research base that is presumed for the masters of French, German, and Italian music has not been in place in Russian opera. Arguments in the realm of Russian music are fre-

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Musorgsky to Vladimir Stasov, 16/22 June 1872.



quently based on conventional truths and falsehoods that have migrated effortlessly from rumor into memoir and from there into academic discourse. For whatever reason—perhaps the language and alphabet barrier, or perhaps Soviet ideological constraints—scholarly discussion has all too often remained at the level of unexamined cliché.

As the reader will realize, Taruskin leaves absolutely no convention or cliché unexamined. But he does more: he sucks the reader into an eddy of facts all moving in a particular, and usually controversial, direction. The very pull of his thesis occasionally prods us to protest and strike out on our own. (As Taruskin invites us to do: "let me conclude by forswearing any claim of privilege for the authorial conceptions and purposes I have tried to tease out of the scores and documents," he demurs in his Epilogue. "In no sense do they set boundaries to legitimate reading.") No methodology could better serve a scholarly field.

The organization of the present book deserves comment. In plan it is a fat core of previously published (but not easily available) essays, flanked on either end by new and provocatively polemical pieces. Chapters 1 through 7, several of which are already classics, are arranged here not in order of their writing but rather to accord with Musorgsky's own biographical development. The outer frame, however, is more sensitive to contemporary events: it owes its punch and coherence to *glasnost'* and to the de-ideologization of Russian cultural heroes that got under way in the late 1980s.

Some words first on the core. By daring to open the body of his text not on the big known operas but on tiny, more peripheral matters (the dating of two versions of an early, relatively unfamiliar song; the grounding of Musorgsky's maiden experiment in realistic recitative, a setting of Gogol's *Marriage*, in neoclassical mimetic theories of art; the composer's relationship with the then-celebrated, now-forgotten Alexander Serov), Taruskin in effect liberates both his hero and his reader from the anachronistic temptations of a later fame and places Musorgsky back into the thick of the 1860s, where he was a minor and eccentric figure still very much in search of his own voice. Chapters 4 through 7, the book's inner core as it were, give us the Musorgsky corpus we know best and love most, *Boris Godunov* and *Khovanshchina*. But beware: Taruskin's revisions of received wisdom are many and profound. Among the most significant are his insistence on the integrity and autonomy of the two authorial

versions of *Boris*; his refusal to endorse the image of Musorgsky as martyr and its concomitant "myth of the malign directorate [of the Imperial Theaters]"; his uncovering of historiographical subtexts for the Kromy scene in *Boris* that detach it ideologically from mass scenes in other contemporaneous operas; his account of the weirdly complex, counterintuitive origins of the folk songs in *Boris*, in particular the famous *Slava!*; and a reading of *Khovanshchina* that is boldly contrary to the reformist spirit of the sixties, which is to say, a reading that defines this second historical opera, despite its subtitle, as precisely the opposite of a progressive "musical folk drama." Heretically (and quite persuasively), Taruskin classifies it as an "aristocratic tragedy informed by pessimistic historiography." One wishes that the Marquis de Custine could have seen a performance of the opera thus construed; he would have rejoiced.

As Taruskin's chapters progress, fussy detail diminishes, literary and cultural background comes into play in a more focused way, and arguments become increasingly lapidary and robust. Chapter 8 on *Sorochints'i Fair*, new for this volume, takes as its starting point the ambivalent moral and political message underlying Nikolai Gogol's contribution to Russian opera. Taruskin suggests that Gogol's Ukrainian tales, massively popular as sources for potential libretti, were permeated by the same retrograde, nonprogressive, implicitly imperialist brand of folklore that came powerfully back into vogue in the 1860s, through the efforts of opera composers such as Alexander Serov.<sup>3</sup> En route to *Sorochints'i Fair*, Musorgsky's talent evolved from extremist-realist recitative to so-called rationally justified melody of the *Khovanshchina* sort, where folk melody marked the identity not of persons but of groups and moods—in short, a return to the world of romantic *narodnost'*. Did this conservative turn in Musorgsky's musical thinking bespeak a larger and less attractive conservatism in other realms?

Taruskin devotes some space to the Byzantine refinements of Musorgsky's anti-Semitism, but that is just the beginning. His tour de force comes with a frontal attack on all the Soviet-bred truisms that for a century have been refashioning Musorgsky into a dissident populist, militant realist, and radical democrat from what the evidence in fact suggests he was: an aristocrat with an early clinical interest in

<sup>3</sup> For more extensive development of Serov's role in Russian musical culture, see Taruskin's massive *Opera and Drama in Russia as Preached and Practiced in the 1860s* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981), especially chapters 2–4.

true-to-life musical portraiture and a later penchant for drinking partners who were both folklore buffs and political reactionaries. Taruskin concludes that at the time of his death Musorgsky, along with what was left of his early maverick circle, was on the brink of being absorbed, and most willingly, into the Establishment—much as happened with Ilya Repin and his breakaway band of artists. Professional at last.

This revisionist biography is set off nicely by the book's outer frame, where the politics of Modest Musorgsky are deftly pre- and postfigured. We note a satisfying symmetry. The Introduction focuses on what we might call, echoing Musorgsky's second historical opera, "*Stasovshchina*"—the *-shchina* suffix referring to distortions, however well-meant, brought on by the pervasive, possessive meddling of Vladimir Stasov both during and after the composer's life. Stasov's grim rectitude is contrasted with the more aristocratic and "decadent" intimacy Musorgsky achieved with Count Arseny Golenishchev-Kutuzov, poet for several of Musorgsky's most inspired songs and later a high-ranking official at the imperial court. The tension between the composer's "aristocratic inclinations and kuchkist pose" is thus set up from the start, not to be resolved until the end of the eighth chapter.<sup>4</sup>

But does Taruskin resolve this tension? In the Epilogue, he notes with deep pleasure the fact that Musorgsky, whose jubilee decade (1981–89) loosely overlapped the *glasnost* years, is now no longer routinely "Stasovized." To be sure, in the Russian context this has not meant that he was depoliticized, or that his image was released to seek its own free-wheeling, contradictory stability. "So far from the proto-Soviet populist of old," Taruskin writes of this era that so eagerly dethroned precursors to communism, "he was now to be consecrated as the grim prophet of the Soviet tyranny." This inversion has occasioned some peculiar and quite fanciful inventions, most noticeably the Christianization of Musorgsky's operas and worldview. But in that, too, Taruskin sees the healthy first steps toward genuine cultural pluralism. Of course, Musorgsky's own artistic intent should be recuperated under conditions of optimal schol-

<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that the animus against Golenishchev-Kutuzov, and a defensive dismissal of his memoirs of Musorgsky, is still alive and well among Soviet-trained musicologists, even those publishing in the West. See the quite intemperate preface in Alexandra Orlova, ed. and compiler, *Musorgsky Remembered* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. x–xii.

arly freedom. But those documented intentions need not constrain later competing interpretations of the work.

The Russian literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin put this point well in his discussion of the artistic potential of great works. "Neither Shakespeare himself nor his contemporaries knew that 'great Shakespeare' whom we know now," Bakhtin wrote. "There is no possibility of squeezing our Shakespeare into the Elizabethan epoch. . . . The author is captive of his epoch, of his own present. Subsequent times liberate him from this captivity."<sup>5</sup> Taruskin concurs: "The works are ours now, not Musorgsky's." And thus we have Taruskin's goal in this collection of essays, one he has vigorously pursued in other forums where questions of musical authenticity are debated: "to inform choice, not delimit it."

To return, in closing, to the Marquis de Custine. In 1839 he was negatively impressed by the imitativeness, regimentation, and frivolity of Russian efforts in the realm of culture. "The Russians have not yet reached the point of civilization at which there is real enjoyment of the arts," he wrote from St. Petersburg. "At present their enthusiasm on these subjects is pure vanity; it is a pretense, like their passion for classic architecture. Let these people look within themselves, let them listen to their primitive genius, and, if they have received from Heaven a perception of the beauties of art, they will give up copying, in order to produce what God and nature expect from them." Whatever complex image we eventually construct of Modest Musorgsky, he was indisputably a titan of that generation that Custine so hoped would arrive, to reveal to Russia her own intensifying and protean self.

<sup>5</sup> "Response to a Question from the Novy Mir Editorial Staff" [1970], in M. M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), pp. 4-5.

## A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

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AFTER MUCH thought and experiment, it was decided to adopt with modifications the system for transliterating Russian vowels that was worked out by Gerald Abraham for the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. For a complete account of it, see the *New Grove* 1.xvi-xvii.

The chief merit of the system is that it assigns Roman characters to Cyrillic ones with consistency, so that adjectival endings may be rendered faithfully. The Russian letter ы, pronounced as a thick short *i*, is represented by the character *ï*, while the Russian ѣ, signifying iotation, is represented by *y*. The palatalizing vowels я and ю are represented by *ya* and *yu*. The Cyrillic Е is usually transliterated by its Roman cognate, but in initial position and after vowels or hard/soft signs it is rendered as *ye*. Where *e* is found in such positions, it signifies the Russian э.

Modifications are introduced for the sake of clarity, based on the pronunciation habits of English-speaking readers. Thus the diphthong "Аѣ" (which rhymes with "high" as in Nikolai) is rendered as *ai*, since *ay* would suggest to English readers a rhyme with "day." When the vowels а and и are conjoined, each receiving its full phonetic value, this is signified by the use of an accent, thus: Mikhaïl (pronounced Mi-kha-eel). When one of a pair of и's receives an accent, the pair is represented by *-iyi-*, as in "Mariyinsky Theater." When the pair occurs at the end of a plural or a genitive, neither member taking an accent, *-ii* is the form adopted in transliteration.

Like the *New Grove*, this book respects standard renderings where they have become firmly established and where a more faithful transliteration would therefore be distracting. Thus the usual spelling *-sky* is retained for the suffix ский in names like Rimsky or Musorgsky. Such other customary Roman spellings as Prokofiev and Koussevitzky are likewise retained. Many such spellings not sanctioned by the *New Grove*, such as Diaghilev and Chaliapin, are also kept. On the other hand, owing to a confessed quirk on the part of the author, who is possibly oversensitive to reminders of the onetime musical

#### A NOTE ON transliteration

provincialism of the English-speaking peoples, "Tchaikovsky" is rejected in favor of the more literal "Chaikovsky," which is perfectly regular for English, though not for French or German.

In bibliographical citations, transliteration is strictly according to the rules, letter by letter, not according to customary usage or phonetics. *г* is always *g*, even in genitive endings where Russians now pronounce it *v*. Those for whom the citations are useful are precisely the ones who would find sound-based modifications annoying in this case.

## A NOTE ON DATES

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THE Julian calendar (known as the "Old Style," abbreviated O.S.) was used in Russia until 1 February 1918, and is still the calendar of the Russian Orthodox Church. In the nineteenth century Russian dates were twelve days behind those of the Gregorian calendar ("New Style," or N.S.), used elsewhere in Europe and in America. The year 1900 being a leap year according to the Julian calendar but not the Gregorian, from 29 February 1900 to 1 February 1918 the two "styles" were thirteen days apart.

In this book dates for events taking place in Russia will always be given according to the calendar in use in Russia. Whenever there is a possibility of confusion, or where Russian dates must be synchronized with Western ones, double dating will be employed unless O.S. or N.S. is specified.

# TABLE OF ABBREVIATIONS

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AsIT	Akademik Boris Vladimirovich Asafyev, <i>Izbrannīye trudi</i> [Selected papers]. 5 vols. Moscow: Akademiya nauk SSSR, 1952–57.
BalStasP	M. A. Balakirev and V. V. Stasov, <i>Perepiska</i> [Correspondence]. Ed. Anastasya Sergeevna Lyapunova. 2 vols. Moscow: Muzika, 1970–71.
BorP	Sergey Alexandrovich Dianin, ed., <i>Pis'ma A. P. Borodina</i> [Letters of A. P. Borodin]. 4 vols. Moscow: Muzgiz, 1928–50.
CuiIP	César Antonovich Cui, <i>Izbrannīye pis'ma</i> [Selected letters]. Leningrad: Muzgiz, 1955.
CuiIS	César Antonovich Cui, <i>Izbrannīye stat'i</i> [Selected articles]. Leningrad: Muzgiz, 1952.
FridMPM	Emiliya Lazarevna Frid, <i>M. P. Musorgskiy: Problemi tvorchestva: issledovaniya</i> [Musorgsky: research problems involving the works]. Leningrad: Muzika, 1981.
GozROT	Abram Akimovich Gozenpud, <i>Russkiy operniy teatr</i> [The Russian operatic theater]. 5 vols.: GozROTI: <i>Russkiy operniy teatr XIX veka (1836–1856)</i> . Leningrad: Muzika, 1969. GozROTII: <i>Russkiy operniy teatr XIX veka (1857–1872)</i> . Leningrad: Muzika, 1971. GozROTIII: <i>Russkiy operniy teatr XIX veka (1873–1889)</i> . Leningrad: Muzika, 1973. GozROTIIV: <i>Russkiy operniy teatr i Shalyapin 1890–1904</i> . Leningrad: Muzika, 1974. GozROTV: <i>Russkiy operniy teatr mezhdv dvukh revolyutsiy 1905–1917</i> . Leningrad: Muzika, 1975.
JAMS	<i>Journal of the American Musicological Society</i> (periodical).
MR	Jay Leyda and Sergey Bertensson, eds. and trans., <i>The Musorgsky Reader: A Life of Modeste Petrovich Musorgsky in Letters and Documents</i> . New York: W. W. Norton, 1947.
MusCW	Modest Musorgsky, <i>Complete Works</i> (reordered reprint of MusPSS). 23 vols. (26 installments). New York: Edwin F. Kalmus, 1969.



# TABLE OF ABBREVIATIONS

MusIM	Malcolm Hamrick Brown, ed., <i>Musorgsky: In Memoriam 1881–1981</i> . Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982.
MusLN	Modest Petrovich Musorgsky, <i>Literaturnoye nasledie</i> [Literary legacy]. Ed. Mikhail Pekelis and Alexandra Orlova. 2 vols. Moscow: Muzika, 1971–72.
MusPD	Andrey Nikolayevich Rimsky-Korsakov, ed., <i>M. P. Musorgskiy: Pis'ma i dokumenty</i> [M. P. Musorgsky: letters and documents]. (Moscow and Leningrad: Muzgiz, 1932).
MusPSS	M. P. Musorgsky, <i>Polnoye sobraniye sochineniy</i> [Complete collected works]. Ed. Pavel Alexandrovich Lamm. 8 vols. (26 installments). Moscow: Muzgiz; and Vienna: Universal, 1928–39).
MuzN	Mikhail Vladimirovich Ivanov-Boretsky, ed., <i>Muzikal'noye nasledstvo: Sbornik materialov po istorii muzikal'noy kul'tury v Rossii</i> [Musical heritage: an anthology of archival materials on the history of art music in Russia]. Moscow: Ogiz and Muzgiz (joint publication), 1935.
MZh	<i>Muzikal'naya zhizn'</i> [Musical life] (periodical).
NasMPM	Yevgeniy Mikhailovich Levashov, ed., <i>Nasledie M. P. Musorgskogo</i> [The legacy of M. P. Musorgsky]. Moscow: Muzika, 1989.
OldBGC	Robert William Oldani, "Boris Godunov and the Censor." <i>19th-Century Music</i> 2 (1978–79): 245–53.
OrTD	Alexandra Anatolyevna Orlova, <i>Trudi i dni M. P. Musorgskogo: letopis' zhizni i tvorchestva</i> [M. P. Musorgsky's works and days: a chronicle of his life and works]. Moscow: Muzgiz, 1963.
R-KMusL	Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, <i>My Musical Life</i> . Trans. Judah A. Joffe. London: Eulenberg Books, 1974.
RMusMus	Edward R. Reilly, <i>The Music of Musorgsky: A Guide to the Editions</i> . New York: The Musical Newsletter, 1980.
SerIS	Alexander Nikolayevich Serov, <i>Izbrannyye stat'i</i> [Selected articles]. 2 vols. Moscow: Muzgiz, 1950–57.
SovM	<i>Sovetskaya muzika</i> [Soviet music] (periodical).
StasIS	Vladimir Vasilyevich Stasov, <i>Izbrannyye sochineniya</i> [Selected works]. 3 vols. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1952.
StasPR	V. V. Stasov, <i>Pis'ma k rodnim</i> [Family correspondence]. Ed. Yelena Dmitriyevna Stasova. 3 vols. (vols. 1 and 3 in two parts each). Moscow: Muzgiz, 1953–62.
StasSEM	Vladimir Stasov, <i>Selected Essays on Music</i> . Trans. Florence Jonas. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968.
StasSM	V. V. Stasov, <i>Stat'i o muzike</i> [Articles on music]. 5 vols. Moscow: Muzika, 1974–80.